
Saint Philip's: A Cathedral for Service, Not Empire

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Choral Eucharist on the Feast of St. Philip

Today, observing the feast of Saint Philip the Deacon, it is worth noting what it means for a cathedral to be named for a deacon. From age to age, cathedrals and churches have succumbed to the damaging perception of being imperialistic. And whenever we have tried to be imperialistic, we have failed the gospel. Every age has its empires; but the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation has been consistent on the subject of empires. Whatever the empire of the age is, the Bible is against it. The Bible is like the "Star Wars" movie in that regard – The empire is evil! (Or, I should say, the "Star Wars" movie takes that theme directly from the Bible!) The Bible is against empire.

In the time of Moses, the empire was Pharaoh and Egypt. The Bible was against Pharaoh. Then it was the empire of Assyria, in the eighth century BC, who conquered the Northern Israel Kingdom. The Bible was against Assyria. Then it was Babylon, who demolished the temple of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Bible was against the empire of Babylon. Then, in first century, AD, the empire was certainly Rome. The Bible, and first century Christians in general, were against the Roman Empire.

Empires generally get their way by imposing, and by being imposing. Empires are imperious, deciding their way without the consensus of the people, and generally without respect for the common good.

Sadly, in times of tension, even good and healthy structures, like the church, are tempted to imperiousness. Sometimes we have good reason to act imperiously. But such action can be dangerous. (It might be said that the last ten or fifteen years of anxiety in the Episcopal Church have tempted us to act too imperiously. But that's a topic for another essay.) Certainly cathedrals have been perceived as systems that can act imperiously. Indeed, some people actually desire for cathedrals to act imperiously, with all-or-nothing absolutism.

But that is decidedly not the mission of the Cathedral of St. Philip. Even when people project grandeur and imposition upon us, when they want us to be grand and imposing, that is not our way.

With our name, the Cathedral of St. Philip follows a deacon, called to serve. We are a cathedral named for a deacon. Named not for an emperor, not for a king, not for a president, not for a CEO. Named for a deacon. Deacons are servants.

The apostles of Jesus, apparently, did succumb to false perceptions of greatness. One day, they argued as to which one of them was the greatest. So Jesus said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles (those in the world) those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." (Luke 22:24 and Mark 10:42-43). I wish that passage was the assigned gospel assigned for the feast of St. Philip! The greatest among you is the one who serves, not the one who is the emperor. "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

When I talk about our ministry here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, I talk about service with three words, three words that I use a lot. Those words are grace, excellence, and hospitality.Of course, the values of grace and excellence and hospitality can mean different things to people, and that is fine. But, for me, the meanings are these: Grace is simply the elegant love of God; it is the love of God expressed in as simple and beautiful and economical a way as possible. Excellence is the desire to do things well, according to whatever the

standard of the event or project is. Hospitality is respect; hospitality is welcoming everyone, including everyone, dignifying everyone, especially the stranger, especially the Ethiopian eunuch. Hospitality is serving others more than oneself.

Happy St. Philip's Day to you! May we enjoy both intimacy and transcendence here. May the servanthood of grace, excellence, and hospitality be with all of us!

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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